

Moving from Anguish to Power

Two tenants facing eviction talk about how they had to choose between sitting down and standing up.

Annie Gordon and Betty Lewis



NOTE: Find a shorter version of this story on p. 19. Annie Gordon (above, in the striped shirt) has lived for 45 years in the Fairlawn apartments in the Mattapan neighborhood of Boston. And Betty Lewis (in the grey shirt, next to Annie) has lived there for 39 years. In 2018, a new company bought their building and gave them rent increases they couldn't afford. For Annie the increase was \$275 per month, and for Betty it was \$300 per month. Although they had lived in the same apartment building for decades, they didn't meet until they decided to fight back against these rent increases. Here is their story.

Big Rent Increase = Big Anxiety

Annie: When the new owner gave me the rent increase, I told them I couldn't afford it. He responded that he could charge me whatever he wanted. I've been here for 45 years. Where would I go? It gave me such an anxious feeling.

Someone told me I should call City Life/Vida Urbana, an organization that fights to stop evictions. I didn't want to get involved in something like that, but I felt panicked, so I decided to go. That's where I first met Betty.

Getting Active

Betty: When City Life organizers knocked on my door, they told me I could fight my rent increase by joining a Tenants Association. But I didn't want to be part of it. I'm a quiet person. I'm a homebody. However, when the landlord asked me to sign the new lease, I changed my mind. I told him, "No, I'm going to fight this." I realized I

had to be strong for my daughter.

I started going with Miss Annie to the City Life meetings. City Life tells people like me, "Don't be embarrassed." But I did feel kind of embarrassed. I didn't want people to know my story. Then I listened to other people's stories. I realized I was not alone. You feel so much love at the meeting. You can't help but feel better.

Next thing you know, I'm going to rallies, making phone calls, and talking to the media. One day my girlfriend said, "I heard you on the radio! I know your voice, girl!" I was using my voice, and people were hearing me!

Being in the Struggle

Betty: I'm still scared though. I don't have a lease. Sometimes I cry. Then I say, "Girl, where is your power? Where is your faith?"

Annie: As someone who deals with mental health issues, I wasn't sure how much to get involved.

But then I went to a meeting, and I learned about my rights as a tenant. I got to a point where I could speak out about these things. I could speak for myself and for others. I felt more powerful. But the stress is always there. The anguish keeps you up at night. You want it to be over with.

New Friends and Connections

Annie: No one wants to have to fight to stay in their home, but there are some good things about it, like meeting Betty. It was so exciting to have a new friend. We're in this journey together. I know I have Betty. And Betty knows she has me.

Betty: I love Annie. When you have a friend, you don't feel alone.

Annie: We're each other's wing girls.

Betty: She keeps me motivated. Sometimes, I think I just can't do it. Knowing Annie is right across the way means so much to me.

Annie: The City Life organizers have also become friends. They're like family. They have the biggest hearts, and they always call on me. I was shy before. But since I started working with City Life, I talk to the media and I speak at protests. I get this adrenaline flow from any actions I'm a part of. It helps me feel good and connected. I feel like my voice makes a difference.

Betty: I have learned some good habits from these organizers: fight back and stay strong. I've learned how to say, "I am somebody. I'm not just like a chair you can push over when you're done with me."

Medicine for Your Mental Health

Annie: My doctor diagnosed me with panic attacks and stress. But when I'm with City Life, I feel less panic. Everyone at City Life makes you feel welcome. They let you know, "No matter what is going on with you, we love you."



A City Life protest at the Massachusetts State House.

In fact, I told my doctor about City Life. She sees a difference in how I am since I've been participating in this struggle. She encourages me to stay involved. She can see it is good for me.

Betty: When City Life organizers ask me to talk at a rally or to the media, I feel panicky. But then once I start, I can't shut up. After years of ignoring us, the landlord finally agreed to meet with us. This was a big victory – just forcing him to sit down and talk to us. When we were in the meeting, he said something that made me angry. So I just told him what I felt. I said, "I don't mind paying a fair rent, but this increase is not fair. You're putting in low quality appliances, the carpets are in bad shape, and the conditions are bad. You need to be fixing these places. And besides, I'm looking for a contract. I want a five-year contract that says you won't raise rents more than 2.5% per year. I'm not going to give up. I'm going to continue fighting."

Annie: Speaking at that meeting gave me a sense of power. I told them, "We understand we have to pay something, but we don't want to do all the giving. You came to our community to capitalize



Betty Lewis speaks at a rally in front of her apartment building. Photos from www.clvu.org.



Annie Gordon speaks at a rally. Watch the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/citylifeboston/videos/2436307359822005/>

on the work we've done already in this area."

For example, we fought to get a T station in our neighborhood so we could more easily get downtown. It was a win for our neighborhood. But now the landlord gets the benefits from it.

You can get a little angry when you think about it. Sometimes you feel a little down. But then you fight back. I figured I could do one of two things: I could sit down or I could stand up. So I chose to stand up for myself and for my neighbors.

Not Alone

Betty: We tell the other tenants, "Don't talk to the landlord as an individual. You are stronger if you are part of the Tenant Association."

People get discouraged. But I remind them, "We're still here. We haven't moved out and we haven't paid the rent increase."

Advice to those facing injustice

Annie: I pray and I trust in God. And I tell Him to give me the strength, directions, and guidance. What I can't control, I put in His hands. And I believe that He takes it into His hands because I get a sense of calm when I pray.

Betty: Listen to your mind. Get information. There are organizations that can help you. Don't be ashamed. Tell your story! Let it flow.

Be grateful to the almighty God. Put Him first, and then you can accomplish anything. Be strong. Remember you're not alone. There's power in being together. One is one. But two is better.

AFTER YOU READ: Point to the places in the text where Annie and Betty imply or explicitly state that standing up and fighting for their homes has supported their mental health.



Annie Gordon (left) and Betty Lewis (middle) are leaders of the Tenant Association in their apartment complex (previously known as Fairlawn, currently called "SOMA on the T"). Cynthia Peters, editor of *The Change Agent* and a volunteer at *Citly Life/Vida Urbana*, interviewed them on Zoom for this story.